

# The Science of Leadership

## WEAPONS OF INFLUENCE-RECIPROCITY

by

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transformational leaders do uninvited favors for people in order to build a network of obligations they can tap for loyalty, support and return favors in the future. They don't assume defeat when they are forced to make a concession. They know that the concession might just prime their followers to respond favorably to new but smaller request. Followers rarely recognize that the unexpected gifts or favors they receive from transformational leaders carry a steep price. Consequently, the norm of reciprocity catches them

**I**t was the worst mass murder of American citizens in history prior to September 11, 2001. On November 18, 1978, Jim Jones, the leader of the Peoples Temple cult ordered his followers to kill themselves and their children. Most of Jones' followers did as he instructed. Over 900 cult members, including 276 children died, most by consuming a grape drink laced with cyanide. Many possible explanations have been offered as to why the Jonestown tragedy occurred and why so many failed to resist Jones' evil call. Most relevant for our purposes is the explanation offered by Diane Louie, one of Jones' followers who did resist and fled to save herself from the vat of poison. Louie recalled that one of Jones' tactics for gaining control over people was to do them special favors. In fact, he had offered her special food when she had been sick. She refused the food because she said, "I knew once he gave me those privileges, he'd have me. I didn't want to owe him nothing."<sup>1</sup> Louie attributed her later refusal to follow Jones' orders and kill herself to her earlier refusal to become indebted to him. Since he had done her no special favor before she felt no need to reciprocate.<sup>2</sup>

In part, Louie saved herself because she avoided being trapped by the "norm of reciprocity." As we will see in this chapter, the norm of reciprocity is a powerful human emotion some transformational leaders tap in order to control follower behavior.

## The Norm of Reciprocity

**Norm of Reciprocity** says, "We should try to repay, in kind, what another person has provided us."<sup>3</sup>

You do me a favor so I must do one for you.

You buy me lunch today so I must buy you lunch tomorrow.

You give me a present on my birthday so I must remember yours.

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You invite me to a party. I must invite you to one.

Cultural anthropologists note that the norm of reciprocity is critically important to the emergence and maintenance of cooperation that is a foundation for civilization. The norm of reciprocity creates a “web of indebtedness” within which we can comfortably and reliably exchange goods and services. Robert Cialdini says that reciprocity is so important to human societies that we are all carefully trained to comply with it.

Each of us has been taught to live up to the rule, and each of us knows the social sanctions and derision applied to anyone who violates it. Because there is a general distaste for those who take and make no effort to give in return, we will often go to great lengths to avoid being considered a moocher, ingrate, or freeloader.<sup>4</sup>

Studies of the impact of incentives on the response rate to mail surveys have demonstrated just how powerful the norm of reciprocity truly is. For example, one meta-analysis of the research on the use of incentives in mail surveys found that surveys that included a gift, particularly a gift of monetary value such as a check, generated a 65 percent higher response rate than surveys that contained no gift or that promised a reward only if and when the survey was returned.<sup>5</sup> In another study, researchers found that they obtained a much higher response rate to their survey by including a check for \$5 than promising to pay recipients \$50 upon completion and return of the survey. Interestingly, the majority of people who received the \$5 check and **did not** return the survey **didn't** cash the check.<sup>6</sup>

## The Game of Give and Take

A variation on the reciprocity rule of providing an uninvited favor, such as the gift of a check, to obtain a return favor such as completion of a survey is to provide an initial concession in order to receive a return concession. Cialdini illustrates this working of the reciprocity norm with an experiment he conducted in the mid-1970s. College students posing as representatives of a youth camp approached students on a college campus and asked them if they would agree to chaperon a group of children on a day trip to a zoo. Over 80 percent of the college students refused. The next day the researchers repeated the experiment with only one change. Before asking the students if they would chaperon the children to the zoo, the researchers asked for a much larger favor. Would the college students work two hours per week as counselors at the youth camp for a period of two years without pay? As expected, all of the college students refused. At that point the researchers ask their zoo-trip question. Well then, would you just agree to chaperon the children on a trip to the zoo? Three times as many students agreed to be zoo chaperons. Apparently the norm of reciprocity kicked in. The researcher's initial concession to the counseling request set up an obligation for the students to respond favorably to the much smaller chaperon request.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, Cialdini argues that this large-request/concession/small-request approach to the norm of reciprocity might have been part of what led to the break-in of the Watergate offices of the Democratic National Committee that ultimately led to the resignation of Richard Nixon. Everyone, Democrat and Republican alike, agreed after the fact that the break-in had been a dumb idea. It was risky, expensive (\$250,000), and likely to yield little if any value, and yet John Mitchell, the director of Nixon's reelection committee and his primary assistants approved of the foolish idea. Why did these smart politicians do such a dumb thing? Cialdini says the answer may lie in a little-known fact about the incident.

The \$250,000 plan they approved was not Liddy's first proposal. In fact, it represented a significant concession on his part from two earlier proposals of immense proportions. The first of these plans, made two months earlier in a meeting with Mitchell, Magruder, and John Dean [Mitchell's assistants], described a \$1 million program that included (in addition to the bugging of the Watergate) a specially equipped communications "chase plane," break-ins, kidnapping and mugging squads, and a yacht featuring "high-class call girls" to blackmail Democratic politicians. A second Liddy plan, presented a week later to the same group of Mitchell, Magruder, and Dean, eliminated some of the program and reduced the cost to \$500,000. It was only after these initial proposals had been rejected by Mitchell that Liddy submitted his "bare-bones" \$250,000 plan, in this instance to

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Mitchell, Magruder, and Frederick LaRue [another assistant]. This time the plan, still stupid but less so than the previous ones, was approved.<sup>8</sup>

Cialdini speculates that Mitchell and his assistants approved Liddy's stupid plan because they got trapped by the norm of reciprocity.

#### Give and Take

Robert Cialdini says a fifth-grade schoolteacher once wrote to him with the answer one of her students gave to the test question: What is the future tense of "I give?" His response was: "I take." Cialdini says the student may have gotten the grammatical rule wrong, but he got the reciprocity rule right.

In Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice*, p. 26

### **Practical Lesson**

Transformational leaders do uninvited favors for people in order to build a network of obligations they can tap for loyalty, support and return favors in the future. They don't assume defeat when they are forced to make a concession. They know that the concession might just prime their followers to respond favorably to new but smaller request. Followers rarely recognize that the unexpected gifts or favors they receive from transformational leaders carry a steep price. Consequently, the norm of reciprocity catches them

Once followers are caught by the norm of reciprocity and lured into supporting a transformational leader, they often find it hard to stop supporting the leader even if they lose trust in his leadership because to do so would cause them to appear inconsistent. As we will see in the next article, the desire to appear consistent in word and deed is a powerful emotion that transformational leaders use to retain follower support

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice*, (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2001), 30.

<sup>2</sup> The Louie story is taken from Cialdini, *Influence*, 30. For more information on Jim Jones and the Jonestown tragedy see the "House of Representatives Report on Jonestown—Findings" May 15, 1979 at <http://www.rickross.com/reference/jonestown/jonestown1.html/> or Deborah Layton, *Seductive Poison: A Jonestown Survivor's Story of Life and Death in the Peoples Temple*. (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1998.)

<sup>3</sup> Cialdini, *Influence*, 20

<sup>4</sup> Cialdini, *Influence*, 21-22

<sup>5</sup> Alan H. Church, "Estimating the Effect of Incentives on Mail Survey Response Rates: A Meta-Analysis," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1993/57, 62-79.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Robert B. Cialdini and Kelton V. L. Rhoads, "Human Behavior in the Marketplace," 2001/Fall/13/3. See Keith Warriner, John Goyder, Heidi Gjertsen, Paula Hohner, and Kathleen McSpurren, "Charities, no; Lotteries, no; Cash Yes," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1996/60, 542-562 for a similar study.

<sup>7</sup> Cialdini, *Influence*, 39

<sup>8</sup> Cialdini, *Influence*, 42